

Oregon Seniors and the Digital Divide

A Survey of Senior Centers' Internet Access in the New Millennium

U.S. Senator Ron Wyden

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Executive Summary

Computers and the Internet continue to change the ways in which we learn, earn, and communicate with one another. In addition to the many benefits of technology, some of the new advances have an unintended consequence: a new division between the high-tech haves and have-nots.

Nationwide, countless studies have examined the effects of this “digital divide” on our young people and the job market, yet precious little data exists on how this technology disparity is affecting elderly Americans. To raise awareness about this often overlooked gap, Senator Wyden and his staff have prepared the following survey examining the lack of basic computer and Internet resources available to seniors at senior centers in Oregon.

If computers and the Internet serve as the engine driving the New Economy, then access to information is the fuel. Sadly, many seniors are being left behind. According to a 1999 Forrester Research report, only 8 percent of seniors age 65 and older have Internet access as compared to 40 percent of the under 65 population. Low-income seniors are being hit especially hard. An unpublished Department of Commerce report finds that only 1.5 percent of such seniors have access to the Net.¹

In the spring of 2000, Wyden’s staff contacted administrators at senior centers across Oregon to inquire about their computer and online facilities. Through illustrative case studies and an analysis of data, this report highlights the lack of basic information technology available to older Oregonians who rely on senior centers for such services. In his survey, Wyden found that elderly Oregonians who depend on senior centers for computer and online resources are often deprived of these valuable tools. Fifty-two percent of Oregon centers surveyed lacked resident-accessible computers, and 70 percent of all respondents were without access to the Internet.

Purpose

While data has previously emphasized the technology gap’s impact on education and various income groups, few studies have focused on the elderly. In fact, to our knowledge, no national studies of computer and Internet access at senior centers have been conducted. This report follows up on Wyden’s efforts to bridge the digital divide by providing the first look at computer and online resources at senior centers in Oregon.

Methodology

Using the *Oregon Senior Center Directory 2000-2001* provided by the Oregon Senior Center Coalition, Wyden’s staff surveyed Oregon senior centers to collect data on the status of computer and Internet access for seniors. To be listed in the Directory, a senior center must be eligible for funding under Title III of the Older Americans Act (OAA).

¹McConnaughey, Jim. Office of Policy Analysis and Development, National Telecommunications and Information Administration. Facsimile. February, 10, 2000.

Using both questionnaires and telephone interviews, Wyden's staff contacted senior center administrators throughout Oregon to inquire about the availability and condition of their computers and Internet access. For a computer or Internet connection to be considered accessible, seniors need to have access for at least 20 hours a week. Of the 135 senior centers surveyed, replies were received from 100 (74 percent) respondents. Wyden's staff was hindered in their efforts to reach all centers because some did not have public contact information listed. Since centers lacking a published telephone number probably also lack accessible computers, the results may actually overstate the percentage of senior centers with computer or Internet access. In addition, it was particularly difficult to assess the quality of computers and Internet connections in centers. Many respondents were unaware of the exact age of their computers, the processors in them, or the version of the Internet browser they were using.

Definitions

For the purposes of this report, senior centers are defined according to the OAA definition, which classifies a senior center as a community facility for the organization and delivery of a broad spectrum of services, including health, mental health, social, nutrition, and educational assistance and recreational activities for older individuals. A senior center user is defined as an individual who uses a senior center at least once in any given week. In cases where centers provided a range of weekly users, we took the lower number, resulting in a more conservative estimate.

Background: Seniors and the Digital Divide

Contrary to popular belief – and despite the lack of available resources – whether they're e-mailing grandchildren hundreds of miles away or obtaining vital health care information, seniors are flocking to the World Wide Web in record numbers. According to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), 48 percent of its 33 million members used computers in 1998. That same year, AARP Web sites recorded 4.4 million visits, with that number rising to 6.4 million in 1999. This trend is expected to increase with the aging of the more computer-literate baby-boomer population.² A Jupiter Communications study shows that the number of seniors online has quadrupled in the past four years – reaching approximately 14 million in 1999. Jupiter researchers predict that older Americans – age 50 and up – will make up one in ten Internet users by 2002.³

Unfortunately, while the demand for emerging technology is high, many seniors appear unable to access it. According to a 1999 Forrester Research report, only 8 percent of seniors age 65 and older have Internet access as compared to 40 percent of the under 65 population. For elderly Americans living on a fixed income, even a relatively inexpensive \$500 computer is simply out of

²Hinden, Stan. "Computer Age Brings Wide New World to Golden Age." Washington Post March 19, 2000, Sec. H:4.

³Strasburg, Jenny. "Seniors Join the Surfer Crowd. Age is No Barrier Once You Learn Your Way Around the Net." San Francisco Examiner March 7, 2000, Sec. D:5.

range. Low-income seniors are being hit especially hard. An unpublished Department of Commerce report finds that only 1.5 percent of low-income seniors have access to the Net.⁴

Findings: Oregon Senior Centers and Computer/Internet Access

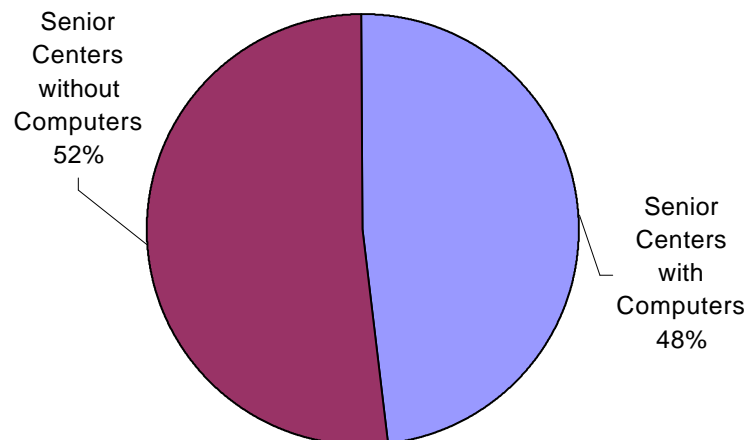
Wyden's survey demonstrates that the bulk of senior centers across the state lack sufficient computer and Internet resources. Because many seniors depend on centers for many of their basic transportation, health care and education needs, this shortage translates into a dearth of accessible technology for many older Oregonians.

Of senior centers surveyed, over half were without available computers (see Chart 1). Those centers which do have computing facilities often employ outdated and decrepit computers which cannot support today's technology. For example, the Albany Senior Center uses computers that are more than 10 years old and not one is Internet-ready.

The scarcity of functional computers means the overwhelming majority of seniors who rely on centers are without Internet access. In this survey, 70 percent of all respondents were found to lack viable connections to the Net (see Chart 2).

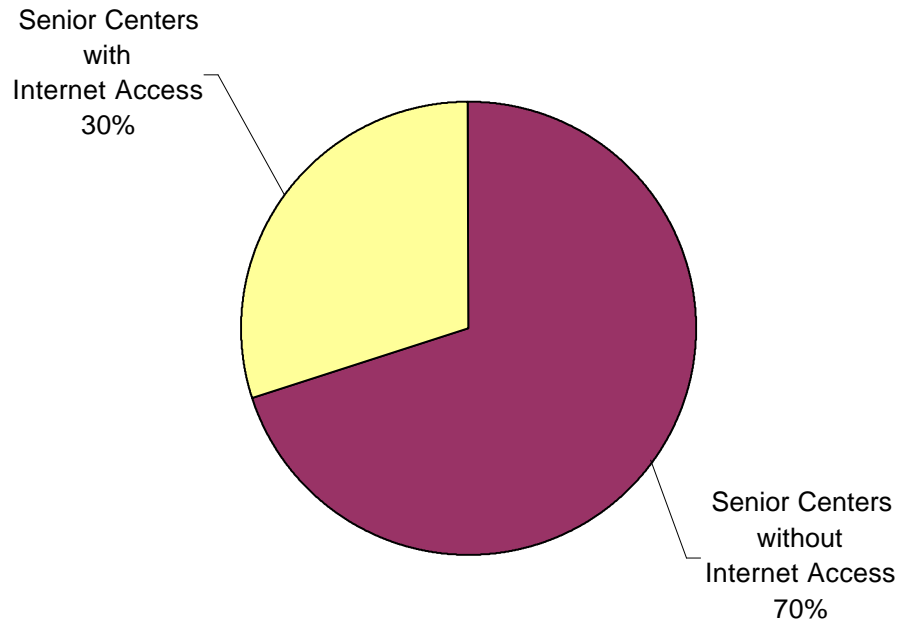
The survey also shows that despite geography or income the digital divide is a problem for seniors throughout Oregon. Even though resources are especially scarce at rural senior centers, many urban centers also have appallingly few high-tech facilities. For example, the Gresham Senior Center, which serves approximately 750 seniors just outside of Portland, doesn't have a single computer.

Chart 1 -- Oregon Senior Centers and Computer Access



⁴McConnaughey, Jim. Office of Policy Analysis and Development, National Telecommunications and Information Administration. Facsimile. February, 10, 2000.

Chart 2 – Oregon Senior Centers and Internet Access



Case Studies

While much has been said about the ramifications of the digital divide on the job market and education, there has been precious little information on the plight of older Americans. In Wyden's research, his staff contacted more than a dozen major non-profit and government agencies with expertise on seniors' issues; not one had conducted or knew of a recent survey of computer or Internet access in our nation's senior centers.

The lack of anecdotal evidence is particularly problematic when considering that, in addition to a digital divide, many seniors suffer from a transportation divide. As the least mobile demographic segment of our adult population, seniors often rely on centers for special transportation services, meaning they are more likely to seek Internet access there than at other locations outside the home.

To assess the extent of this need, Wyden and his staff have collected testimonials from senior center administrators throughout the state and found that, when it comes to a lack of technology resources, the rural and urban elderly alike are feeling the deficiency. The following case studies illustrate the lack of online resources at senior centers.

Powers Senior Activity Center

Powers Senior Activity Center, located in rural Oregon, cannot afford to provide computers for seniors.

“Yes, we would make good use of Internet access and a computer. We are in a low income area and very few of our members have access to a computer or the Internet.”

“I personally was able to obtain information through a friend with Internet access concerning a rare form of cancer I was diagnosed with a year ago. My primary care giver and the doctors were unable to tell me anything about it. The Internet was able to provide the info and it proved to ease my anxiety about the cancer.” -Powers Senior Activity Center, Powers.

Friendly House, Inc.

Friendly House in Portland has six computers available to seniors on a regular basis, but they are not connected to the Internet.

“For one senior, the Internet connection with the 1-stop employment service in our office enabled him to find a job in just one day. For another it has been a successful business connection... For those who are isolated it is an interactive window on the world.”–Friendly House, Inc., Portland.

Gresham Senior Center

Even though Gresham Senior Center is used by 750 seniors a week, there are no computers available to them.

“We do not have the funds to buy computers for our seniors to use... Our seniors would love to have access to computers and the Internet... for the reason of not feeling left behind in an ever-changing world.”–Gresham Senior Center, Gresham.

Forest Grove Senior Center

The Forest Grove Senior Center has only one computer available for the 250 seniors that use the center on a weekly basis.

“Prior to purchasing a computer for home use, one of our seniors used the one at the center to develop skills and practice what he had learned from a computer class he was taking.”–The Forest Grove Senior Center, Forest Grove.

South Salem Senior Center

South Salem Senior Center provides services to approximately 600 seniors a week. The center does not currently have any computers but hopes to purchase some soon from funds they have raised.

“Daily we have requests for computers... Currently, we have 100 individuals signed up for future classes.” -South Salem Senior Center, Salem.

Wyden “S-Rate” Plan

Whether they’re e-mailing grandchildren across the country or looking up health care information on the Net, given the opportunity, seniors are surfing the Web more than ever before. While demand for Internet access is at an all-time high, many senior centers currently lack the tools to meet this growing need.

To bridge the digital divide for seniors, Senator Wyden is working on legislation to help seniors get affordable Internet access. His proposal would offset the costs of Internet connections for senior centers most in need, while encouraging businesses and individuals to donate computers to those centers.

Like the “e-rate,” which connects schools and libraries to the Internet, Wyden’s proposal would create an “s-rate” to provide discounted Internet connections to targeted low-income or rural senior centers. The “s-rate” would cover up to 90 percent of the costs associated with Internet connection – everything from the wires and software needed to access the Internet to support services and training. Under the Wyden plan, funds could also go to purchase computers which most senior centers lack.

The Wyden plan would also help senior centers get the computers they need by offering businesses and individuals a tax credit equal to 30 percent of the fair market value of any computers donated. For donations to senior centers located within empowerment zones, enterprise communities, and Indian reservations, the tax credit would be increased to 50 percent. These credits would be similar to those in Wyden’s New Millennium Classrooms Act – bipartisan legislation to encourage computer donations to schools.